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## Mayor Behind Bill To Annex Parkland

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As cities go, 18-square-mile Hartford is tiny. Perhaps, says Mayor Eddie A. Perez, it's time to expand.

The mayor has asked the state legislature for permission to extend the city's borders - by annexing parts of Windsor and Wethersfield, and, if need be, pieces of Farmington and West Hartford.

He's interested in acquiring only parkland, specifically the portions of city parks within the borders of those towns. Hartford pays to maintain those bifurcated parks in their entirety. The city also pays something akin to a property tax to Windsor and Wethersfield for the parkland within those town borders.

That's unfair, Perez says. So instead of paying Windsor and Wethersfield a total of about \$112,000 a year for the parkland the city maintains there, he says, why not just make those portions of Windsor and Wethersfield a part of Hartford? And because Hartford owns park-land in West Hartford and Farmington - land that is subject to those towns' zoning laws - it might also make sense, city officials say, to make those lands part of Hartford.

The mayor's proposal, submitted before the legislature, has baffled many of the city's neighbors, all of whom are crying imperialism.

"I was like, 'What?'" said Bonnie Therrien, Wethersfield's town manager.

Therrien happened to be in the same room as Perez at the Legislative Office Building when the mayor made the pitch to the planning and development committee Feb. 16.

It was the first time that Therrien, there to testify about volunteer firefighters, had heard of the annexation bill.

The bill proposes "to allow any municipality to annex park land situated in a contiguous municipality provided the park remains open to residents of both municipalities as park

land."

But it's still annexation, and that's downright un-neighborly, said Donald Jepsen, a Windsor town councilman.

"Your gut reaction is that someone is trying to steal part of your town," he said.

Wethersfield Mayor Russ Morin said, "It doesn't do much for me. I'm sure my residents are not going to like it. I would be very surprised if it got out of committee."

It seems Perez would, too. The goal of the bill is not so much to acquire more land, but to highlight the injustice of having to pay other towns for parkland the city owns, said his chief of staff, Matt Hennessy.

"We just want to spark a discussion," Perez said of the bill through a spokeswoman, Sarah Barr.

He added: "We're just asking for a fair shake on how our parks are treated by other towns. We shouldn't have to pay taxes on parkland we maintain and keep open to the residents of our surrounding towns."

Last year, the city was charged \$112,000 by Windsor and Wethersfield for payments in lieu of taxes - an annual payment the city is under court order to pay.

Though public land is tax-exempt, a Superior Court judge ruled in the early 1990s that parts of Goodwin Park in Wethersfield and parts of Keney Park in Windsor are not.

The reason: Those portions of the parks are golf courses that are managed by a private, for-profit company, American Golf Corp.

One hundred and seven acres of Goodwin Park lie within Wethersfield, and 160 acres of Keney Park are in Windsor.

City officials had talked with their suburban counterparts about easing the burden of the payments over a year ago, but no one reached a conclusion. The matter receded until Senate Bill 539 made its way to a public hearing last month.

As far as West Hartford goes, it could eventually be in Hartford's interest to acquire that town's portion of city-owned Elizabeth Park, the setting of a lengthy urban-suburban war over proper use of its Pond House Cafe and Banquet Center, Hennessy said.

"You had a bunch of folks and quite an expensive controversy because it fell under the zoning of West Hartford," Hennessy said. "That gave an opportunity for certain people to cause mischief there."

Despite the bill's potential consequences, some of its sponsors are hazy on details. State

Rep. Art Feltman, D-Hartford, one of three co-sponsors in the legislature, deferred explanation of the bill to the mayor's office. State Sen. John Fonfara, D-Hartford, who represents both Hartford and Wethersfield, says his name shouldn't even be on the bill. It's there, he said, only because he submitted it as part of a long list of bills the mayor's office suggested.

"I am definitely not a sponsor of the bill and I did not testify on behalf of it and I wouldn't support it," Fonfara said.

West Hartford Mayor Scott Slifka said as far as he knew, the town's slice of city-owned Elizabeth Park is not a target of annexation. But he plans to bring the topic up today when he meets with Perez, he said.

"If their intention is to extend the analogy to include West Hartford, then we would strenuously object," Slifka said.

Courant Staff Writer Steven Goode contributed to this story.

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